

Open work spaces: Does your company fit?

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We've all seen the pictures of the impossibly cool work spaces-the ones with big communal tables in the middle of a spacious, high-ceilinged room where 20- and 30-somethings happily collaborate. In fact, more and more organizations have moved that way. The International Management Facility Association estimated in 2010 that 70 percent of office spaces were open-concept. Pictures certainly make it seem like a good idea in a business environment where teamwork is considered paramount to success. But if you're considering changing your layout, start by doing your homework to make sure it's right for your organization.

Companies adopt non-traditional workspaces for a variety of reasons. Enhanced collaboration is most often the stated goal, but there are cost-saving advantages as well, because the big-table approach eliminates the need for individual offices. Improved camaraderie can also be a positive outcome of the wideopen workspaces. But do they actually improve satisfaction and productivity? The limited research that is available is not encouraging.

Intuitively, the idea seems great; in practice, studies have shown that even those employees who are initially enthusiastic about the changes can end up frustrated with the lack of ability to concentrate on their work. Distractions abound, and the good ideas the employer had hoped to engender through collaboration might never appear. In truth, many people are finding ways to cope with the distractions that are counterproductive-or which, at the very least, eliminate the likelihood of collaborative synergy.

I recently walked into an office that was designed to be open and interactive, and found the opposite to be true: It was the quietest place in the building. Everyone in the office was using ear buds and had their eyes trained on their computers. One might have thought these people didn't like one another, but I knew that wasn't the case. They were actually just being considerate, ensuring they didn't interrupt one another's work.

To be clear, the idea of open offices is much broader than the "big table" approach. It also includes those rows of cubicles immortalized in movies and television shows. (The term "cubicle farm" is not meant as a compliment.) An economic necessity for many companies, they can also contribute to loss of productivity. While noise levels aren't as great as in office spaces without dividers, it can still be difficult to concentrate.

So, how do you decide if an open office might work for your organization-either by using (more) cubicles or by creating a completely open collaborative space? First, ask yourself what your goal is. Is it to save money by reducing the amount of enclosed office space? If so, you need to evaluate whether possible reductions in productivity will offset those savings. On the other hand,

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if your goal is to increase collaboration, you might be well served to ask your employees what they want instead of assuming.

Talk with your employees to see how to best use the space. Some companies are allowing for more remote work, and this can be a real win-win. Employees can focus at home to get certain tasks done, while also enjoying the benefits of collaboration by coming in to the office. Other companies are approaching the office as a hybrid space-creating some open areas for collaboration, while providing havens of quiet to be used when needed. Research showcased in Harvard Business Review by scholars Brandi Pearce and Pamela Hinds shows that leaders can help people feel better about these specific work spaces by making sure they understand the purpose of the new space, conveying a positive attitude about the space, and allowing employees to personalize their space.

As I was considering this topic, I asked my class of 40 college seniors how many would like to work in a completely open environment. To my surprise, only one young man raised his hand. There are some pretty outgoing personalities in that class-and they certainly fall in the age range that is known to enjoy working collaboratively-but all but the one young man expressed concerns about being able to focus in that type of environment.

Each company is different, with different needs, employees and visions. The open environment might be great for your organization, but don't simply jump on the bandwagon of the latest trend without doing your research.